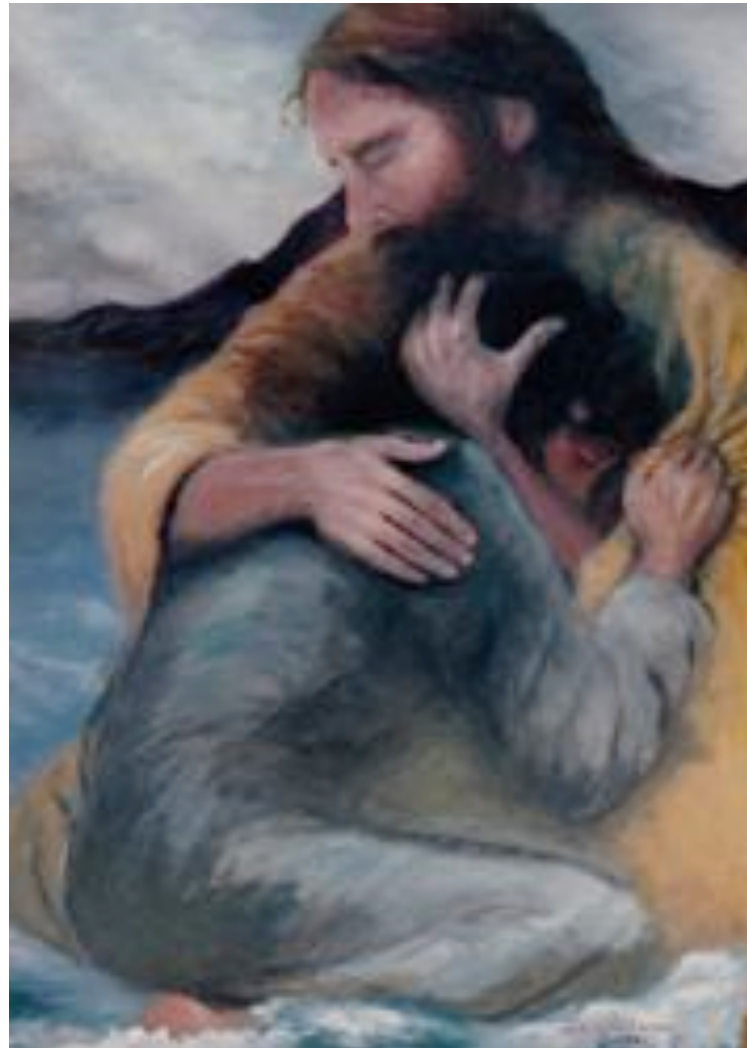


Psalm 139: God's intimate knowledge



Psalm 139 (138) (Mode 1. 5....65 / 3.....23)

This is one of the most beautiful of the psalms. The psalmist is confident that God knows him intimately and therefore knows that the psalmist opposes those who oppose God's will.

Our author seems to be drawing on Near Eastern poetic images which see the sun-god ['Utu', Shamash] as a god of justice scrutinising all mankind with impartiality (see verses 5,8,9 and 12). However the psalmist's accent is on God's transcendence.

‘From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right. If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress’(Psalm 17:2-3).

‘Vindicate me, Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Prove me, Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind’(Psalm 26:1-2).

Echoes of the central theme are found in Job 5:8-9; 23:8-10,17; 26:6,10,14. See Sirach 16:17; 17:15,19,23 and Wisdom 1:7,10.

‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’(Romans 11:33).

‘The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God’
(1Corinthians 2:10)

‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.’
(1John 1:5)

‘I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve’(Revelation 2:23).

Lord, you search me

and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I stand.

You discern my inmost thoughts.

You know if I am journeying or resting.

You know everything I do.

The 'You' in verse 2 is emphatic, as is 'you' in verses 8 and 13.

The idea of God's searching is picked up again towards the end of the psalm (verse 23). Compare the following:

'I know your rising up and your sitting down,
your going out and coming in'(Isaiah 37:28).

Even before a word is on my tongue,
you know, Lord, what I am about to say.

‘The Lord the Almighty
searches out the abyss and the human heart;
he understands their innermost secrets.
For the Most High knows all that may be known;
he sees from of old the things that are to come.
He discloses what has been and what is to be,
and he reveals the traces of hidden things.
No thought escapes him
and nothing is hidden from him’(Sirach 42:18-20).

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

Augustine thinks of God's hand laid on Moses:
'While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft
of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand
until I have passed by; then I will take away my
hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall
not be seen'(Exodus 33:22-23).

I find this overwhelming;
beyond my understanding.

‘The first man did not know wisdom fully;
nor will the last one fathom her’(Sirach 24:28).

‘The angel of the Lord said to Manoah: Why do
you ask my name? It is too wonderful’(Judges 13:18).

Where can I go from your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I scale the heavens, you are there;

if I lie in the grave, you are there.

If I were to take the wings of the dawn
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there you would lead me,

your right hand would hold me fast.

If I think night will hide me,
and darkness give me cover,
to you darkness is not dark;
the night is as bright as the day.

‘Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them’(Amos 9:2-3).

“Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” says the Lord. “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” says the Lord’(Jeremiah 23:23-24).

‘If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness’(Job 17:13).

It was you who formed every part of me,
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I thank you for the wonder of my being,
for the wonders of all your creation.

You watched my body taking shape,
when I was being formed in secret,
You saw my body grow according to your design,
intricately woven, hidden from sight.

‘Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, Lord; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world. Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead’(Isaiah 26:16-19).

‘I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath; nor I who set in order the elements within each of you.’

(The mother to her seven sons in 2Maccabees 7:22)

‘Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews’(Job 10:10-11).

‘In the womb of a mother I was moulded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage’(Wisdom 7:1-2).

All of my life
was written in your book;
all the days that were prepared for me,
before any of them existed.

The Old Testament speaks of a register of what we have done; but nowhere else of a book in which our destiny is written beforehand.

‘You have kept count of my ups and downs; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?’(Psalm 56:8).

‘The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened’(Daniel 7:10).

How mysterious are your thoughts, my God!
They are like countless grains of sand.
To finish counting them
I would have to be, like you, eternal.

‘Who can search out his mighty deeds ... When human beings have finished they are just beginning, and when they stop they are still perplexed’(Sirach 18:4, 7).

‘Let the final word be: ‘he is the all!’(Sirach 43:27).

‘Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven – what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?
Its measure is longer than the earth,
and broader than the sea.
If he passes through, and imprisons,
and assembles for judgment,
who can hinder him?’(Job 11:7-10)

The following eight lines are not in the liturgy

O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would go away.
They speak of you maliciously,
and rise up against you to do evil!

How I hate those who hate you, Lord!
How I loathe those who defy you!
I hate them with a deadly hate.
I count them my enemies.

Psalm 26:4-5,9-10

‘I do not sit with the worthless,
nor do I consort with hypocrites;
I hate the company of evildoers,
and will not sit with the wicked...
Do not sweep me away with sinners,
nor my life with the bloodthirsty,
those in whose hands are evil devices,
and whose right hands are full of bribes.’

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if I follow crooked paths.
Lead me along your ancient way.